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Wa-Kon-Shuts-Kee's Scalping Knife

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ARTICLE III.

WA-KON-SHUTS-KEE'S SCALPING KNIFE.

*To the Honorable, the President and Secretary,
of the State Historical Society of Iowa:*

GENTLEMEN—Permit me to deposit, in the archives of the State Historical Society of Iowa, the accompanying scalping knife, once the property of "Wa-kon-shuts-kee," a second class chief, of the Winnebago nation. It came into my possession, in the Summer of 1835, as a present from Dean Gay, who, in 1825, was a Sergeant in Company "I," of the Third Regiment, of United States Infantry, then stationed at Fort Crawford, near the mouth of Wisconsin river. After carrying it a number of years in my hunting scabbard, it was introduced into the service of my family, under the name of "The Indian Butcher Knife," where the frequent sharpening of it, for the culinary uses of the kitchen, by whetting it, as a hurried convenience might suggest, upon the stone doorstep, the beam of the steelyard, or stove hearth, has reduced it from a slightly worn blade to its present appearance. In other respects, it retains its original appearance. The knife is apparently of English manufacture, and of the kind furnished the Indians by the Hudson Bay Company.

As insignificant and worthless as it may appear, it performed an act that resulted in the Treaty of Fort Winnebago, which deprived the Winnebago nation of their large possession on the Wisconsin river, and originated, twenty eight years ago, the annual payment of forty thousand dollars to the tribe. It is believed that it performed an act, in the hand of Wa-kon-shuts-kee, that has cost the Government of the United States more than a million of dollars, with a continued annual treaty expenditure, that ceases only with the extinction of the Winnebago nation. It is quite certain that it performed an act, which in the Summer of 1825, caused, in the cities of Buffalo, Rochester, Albany, New York, Philadelphia and Baltimore, over thirty thousand volunteer soldiers to pass in review before eleven chiefs of the Winnebago nation, who were on their way to Washington, accompanied by Governor Cass, of the Territory of Michigan. It may be said that

this knife contributed much to a national acquaintance with the name of General Cass. For it was on the occasion of the visit of these chiefs to the City of Washington, that as a boy I first saw and heard the name of this distinguished statesman.

The history of the knife, as I received it from Sergeant Gay, is as follows: In the month of February, of the year 1825, George Allen, William Sublett and Platon Lamar, while in the occupancy of a log-cabin, situated upon the north side of the Wisconsin river, about three miles from its mouth, employed in getting out lumber for the use of the Garrison at Fort Crawford, were adroitly decoyed from their cabin, in the night time, by Wa-kon-shuts-kee, and by him murdered and scalped with the knife here presented. The murder was soon after discovered, and reported to Col. Taylor, then in command at Fort Crawford, and a reward was immediately offered at the garrison, for the arrest of the murderer. A short time after the murder, Wa-kon-shuts-kee, who was then encamped with his band at the mouth of Coole De Sioux, (now occupied by the town of McGregor, in the county of Clayton, Iowa,) went over to Prairie Du Chien, with a part of his band, where, under the influence of liquor, he showed the scalps of the murdered men, and boasted that, although he was accompanied by two other Indians, Red Wing and Pine Top, he alone had taken the three scalps. This boast being made known to Col. Taylor soon after the Indians had started upon their return to the opposite side of the river, early the next morning he dispatched Sergeant Gay, with a command of twelve men, with instruction to proceed in the Government barge to Coole De Sioux, and arrest Wa-kon-shuts-kee. Upon the arrival of the barge, the encampment appeared to be still slumbering under the effects of the debauch of the previous night. The barking of their dogs, however, soon aroused the more sober portion of them, who crept from their wigwams to gaze upon the troops as they passed to the Camp of the Chief, where he was found sleeping, with the scalps resting upon his breast, attached to a string of wampum that encircled his neck. He was aroused and conducted to the garrison without resistance, where he was confined till he had slept away the effects of the liquor that had betried him, when he was brought before the officers of the garrison. He was a short, thick-set, dark complected Indian, with an insinuating smile constantly playing upon his features when speaking. He seemed to look upon the officers

as warriors, who would applaud the act that he had committed, as soon as they were made acquainted with the courage and adroitness that he had manifested in its consummation. Placing the three scalps, his knife and hatchet upon the table in front of the officers, he proceeded to address them through the interpreter, giving the particulars of the murder as follows: "Red Wing and Pine Top came to my wigwam and said: 'When the grass begins to grow, our people would go upon the war-path against the white man.' 'Some of our people' they said, 'did not want to go to war, and they asked me to go with them, and help to kill three white men on the Wisconsin.' They said, 'when these men were killed, some Indians would be killed. Then all our people would be willing to go upon the war-path.' I told them I would go. We went to the cabin of the white men in the day time, when they were away to work. We examined the cabin, and took nothing from the inside. The door opened towards the river. The fire-place was at the end of the cabin up the river. The bed at the end down the river. I made a hole through the chinking under the bed, so that we could see into the cabin. We then went away, taking with us a small dog that belonged to the white men, which we killed. The next night being dark and rainy, we started for the cabin, each having a knife and hatchet. We were to enter the cabin and to say that our canoe had been upset in the river, and we had lost our guns. At the right time, when the men were all sitting down, Pine Top was to whistle, when each was to single out a man and kill him. When we came near the cabin, Pine Top and Red Wing said, 'the men were great hunters, and always carried their knives with them.' They said, 'we had better turn back, and come the next day with our guns, and shoot them when they were at work.' Pine Top and Red Wing are squaws. I told them to hide in the bushes, and I would go and see what I could do. I crept up to the hole that I had made near the corner of the cabin, and looked in. One of the men was sitting upon one side of the fire place, with his head thrown back against the cabin, smoking a pipe. The small man was sitting at the opposite side of the fire place, mending his mocassins; and the other was washing some dishes at a table in front of the fire. I went to the door, scratched upon it, gave a low whistling whine; and then jumped around the corner of the house, and looked in at the hole. The man that was washing the

dishes came to the door, opened it, and told the dog to come in. He waited a short time, when the dog not coming in, he closed the door and went to work again, washing his dishes. I again went to the door, imitated the dog, and returned to my place at the corner of the cabin. The same man opened the door, stepped out, and came to the corner of the cabin where I was standing. As soon as he looked around the corner, I struck him upon the head with my hatchet; and, as he fell, I caught him in my arms, and dragged him towards me, so that he could not be seen from the door. I then looked in at the hole. The man that was smoking was standing up, knocking the ashes from his pipe, which he stuck in between the logs, and then came to the door, and called the man I had killed. Receiving no answer, he went to the opposite corner of the cabin; then turned and came to the corner where I was standing. I struck him with my hatchet, and he fell, before I could get hold of him. He was a large man, and made some noise before he struck the ground. I could not move him. So I turned to the hole in the cabin. The man that was mending the moccasins appeared to be listening. He got up, took down his rifle from over the fire place, came to the door, and called to the men. I then heard the cocking of his gun as he stepped out, and turned to go to the opposite corner of the cabin. With one spring, I was behind him, and struck him upon the back part of the head. He did not fall until I struck him three times, when he was dead. I then scalped them, and called to Red Wing and Pine Top, who came to me, and said that I must give them each a scalp. I told them they were the scalps of white men, who were great hunters. If they wanted a scalp, they could dig up the white woman that died in the Fort. We then came away."

After giving this minute account of the murder, he was ordered to be confined in the garrison, with a ball and chain fastened to his leg. Red Wing and Pine Top were soon after arrested, confined in the garrison, and ornamented with the chain and ball. These two Indians were tall, of light complexion, proud and stately in their carriage. When the chain was riveted upon their legs, the disgrace was so keenly felt, that Red Wing sank down, and never after voluntarily moved. He lived about two weeks, during which time he ate no food. Pine Top, as soon as he was chained, sent for his wife. She came, and, after receiving some order from him, left crying. Two days after, she returned to the garrison

with some soup for him, which he drank, and soon after died. Wa-kon-shuts-kee seemed to grow fat under the keeping of the garrison, and soon began to be regarded by the soldiers as a jovial and companionable fellow.

In the meantime, Governor Cass, hearing of this murder, and the preparations for war on the part of the Winnebagoes, determined as superintendent of the North-western Indians, to invite the Chiefs to accompany him to the City of Washington. Eleven of them accepted the invitation, and it was during this trip, that everywhere on their way to Washington, great military parades were got up, for the purpose of impressing them with an idea of the military power of the United States. At Washington, they received many presents, together with proposals on the part of the Government for the purchase of their lands on the Wisconsin. Upon their return to Prairie Du Chien, the war feeling of the nation was subdued, and the garrison was ordered by the War Department to release Wa-kon-shuts-kee. A few days after he was freed from confinement, a large number of Indians assembled upon the prairie between the Fort and the river, where they engaged in various Indian sports, such as running foot races, playing ball, pitching the quoit, and shooting the arrow with an upward flight. Wa-kon-shuts-kee, with others, was engaged in this last named amusement, when a large, muscular, white man, a stranger who had just landed from a keel boat, came among them, and asked permission to shoot an arrow. A bow was handed to him, when he drew from the quiver of Wa-kon-shuts-kee, by accident, an arrow that was pointed with bone. This he threw with great force into the air, almost directly overhead. And while the Indians were watching its flight, the arrow descended, entering the left eye of Wa-kon-shuts-kee, and passing through his head, he lived but a few minutes.

During the period of twenty-four years, the knife has been in my possession, except for the short time of six months, when it was lost in my garden; and, at another time, it lay about four months, at the bottom of my cistern. About a year since, I received a communication, informing me that I had been elected a Vice President of the "State Historical Society." A few days after the receipt of this communication, I was engaged in my barn yard, loading manure into a wagon, when the old knife made its appearance in the manure. I went with it to the house, and in-

formed my wife that I had found our "Indian Butcher Knife," and that I thought I would make it the subject of a communication to the "State Historical Society." And I now present it to the Society with this communication, as a compensation, in part, for the official honors, which have been bestowed upon me.

Very respectfully yours,

ELIPHALET PRICE.

ALPINE GROVE, CLAYTON COUNTY, December 21, 1859.

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